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ABSTRACT

Sustained silent reading (SSR) is intended to promote reading growth through allowing students to have sustained encounters with self-selected reading material without interruption in the presence of positive peer and teacher role models. Recent research suggests that SSR is of significant value when combined with a regular program of reading. Educational accountability in reading instruction is usually determined from test results. It should, however, address both the cognitive and affective development of readers. Considering the two major variables of content covered and academically engaged minutes, open and closed teaching models seem to stress one or the other of the two areas of development. Although a supplementary activity that cannot replace reading instruction itself, SSR bridges the gap between learning outcomes associated with cognitive reading achievement and affective reading achievement. As such it addresses the concerns of accountability with a single investment of time and without compromises and trade-offs. Although SSR isn't always workable on a schoolwide basis, its strengths and features make it deserving of consideration from reading specialists, classroom teachers, and administrators responsible for accountability and effective reading instruction. (JL)

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SSR, Accountability and Effective Reading Instruction

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SSR, Accountability and Effective Reading Instruction

Sustained silent reading (SSR) is a school reading activity which consists of a period of time during the school day when children and teachers in a class or in the entire school read self-selected books without interruption for purposes of enjoyment. This activity has been a popular adjunct to many reading instruction programs for more than a decade.

The rationale for SSR is that it will promote reading growth through allowing students to have sustained encounters with self-selected reading material without interruption in the presence of positive peer and teacher role models. Students develop reading skill through application and practice; they develop interests and taste through personal motivation and the free pursuit of individual concerns without the constraints of reporting or testing. Also, the avoidance of feelings of failure and stigmatization often engendered by oral reading difficulties exhibited in reading groups helps to promote attitude improvement as well.

Recently, SSR has amassed a research base which strongly suggests that it is of significant value in promoting reading achievement when combined with a regular program of reading instruction and that it has a positive effect on student reading attitudes and habits (Moore, Jones & Miller, 1980; Sadoski, 1980). SSR may also be a reading activity that has more points of contact with successful educational outcomes in reading than perhaps any other single reading activity.

Accountability and Successful Reading Programs

The demand for educational accountability has been acutely felt in the area of reading instruction. Accountability has been linked with measurable or at least observable results, usually in the form of test results. Despite widespread concerns regarding reading tests, particularly criterion-referenced tests (Schell, 1981), the prevailing attitude of accountability is that effective-

ness in reading instruction can be claimed only to the extent to which it produces specific, measured evidence of reading competencies in learners. While this position has emphasized the aspects of reading achievement most amenable to testing, applications that are less direct, but equally important, should be made to promote the less tangible behaviors sought as a result of humanistic education (Strain, 1976).

The objectives of a sound reading program have been expressed by many authorities in many ways, but perhaps most succinctly by Harris (1970) who contends that the goals of an elementary reading program can be grouped into three categories: 1) creating favorable attitudes toward reading, 2) developing fundamental reading skills, and 3) building personal reading taste and interests.

In analyzing successful and widely adopted reading programs, Jackson (1978) has determined that exemplary reading programs have certain characteristics in common. Several of these key characteristics, which Jackson (1978) contends are associated with effectiveness in reading instruction, are: attention to individualized instruction, a literature/reading enjoyment component as part of the program, and ample daily time spent in teaching reading. Jackson (1978) also suggests that it may be important to emphasize program elements in the affective domain, although measures in these areas are imprecise and will not translate into cognitive gains.

There is reasonable evidence both from theory and from the analysis of successful application, that sound, successful reading programs provide for both the cognitive and affective development of readers. Accountability should and must address both concerns.

Teacher Effectiveness in Reading

Rosenshine (1979) has concluded from a review of the literature of student-centered basic skills teaching effectiveness that two major variables are related to gains in student reading achievement as measured by standardized

tests: 1) content covered, and 2) academically engaged minutes. Content covered deals with "opportunity to learn," or the extent to which instruction is directly related to learnings to be assessed and to outcomes that are desired. Academically engaged minutes deals with the amount and degree of student attention allocated to academic tasks. Rosenshine (1979) suggests that this evidence argues for a model of direct instruction, wherein the focus is strongly academic and teacher-controlled. Such programs appear to be related to increased cognitive gains in reading.

Peterson (1979), however, determines from a similar review of literature that while students exposed to direct instruction methods tend to do better on achievement tests, students exposed to open teaching methods tend to exhibit better affective learning outcomes, such as more independence and improved attitude, creativity, and problem solving abilities. The open teaching model is characterized by increased student locus of control, richness of learning materials, integration of curriculum areas, and more individual instruction than large group instruction.

Peterson (1979) concludes that because these differing teaching models tend to produce different desirable learning outcomes, educators should provide opportunities for students to be exposed to both approaches; she cites evidence to suggest that the public supports a wide variety of social and humanistic goals in education that encompass both cognitive and affective learning outcomes. Brophy (1979) similarly concludes that since the instructional situations associated with cognitive outcomes are different and apparently somewhat contradictory to those associated with affective outcomes, trade-offs are in order.

The Place of SSR

SSR is not a reading instruction activity, per se. It is a supplementary activity that enhances reading instruction. However, this does not mean that SSR should be thought of as a frill. Students need ample time to apply the principles learned from reading instruction to actual reading situations in

order to assimilate and transfer what they have learned in their lessons, and to internalize and integrate reading abilities in their own cognitive ways. Developmental learning theory holds that students need to build independence and mastery at a given level before going on to the next one, and educators agree that supplementary reading is an important aspect of learning to be a reader. Typically, however, time constraints and the pressures of testing give short shrift to this aspect. All too frequently both the "real-book" practice and interest components of reading instruction receive reduced or even insignificant attention.

SSR is somewhat unique in that it is one of the few reading activities that appears to bridge the gap between the learning outcomes associated with cognitive reading achievement and affective reading achievement. Numerous studies indicate that when combined with a regular program of reading instruction, SSR produces cognitive achievement gains in reading equal to or greater than other supplementary approaches or no supplementary approach (Oliver, 1973, 1976; Evans and Towner, 1975; Reed, 1977; Lawson, 1968; Pfau, 1966; Vacca, 1980; Cline and Kretke, 1980; Minton, 1980). Many studies also indicate that SSR has a positive effect on student attitude toward reading (Pfau, 1966; Lawson, 1968; Wilmot, 1975; Langford, 1978; Sadoski, 1980; Cline and Kretke, 1981). SSR also appears to address many of the theoretical and applied ideals of complete and successful reading programs as summarized by Harris (1970) and Jackson (1978).

This series of contacts seems to define SSR as an activity which addresses the concerns of accountability in reading education as do few other activites: SSR is mutually effective in providing growth in both cognitive and affective areas of reading. It is also an activity in which trade-offs and compromises are unnecessary because it simultaneously addresses different learning outcomes that are usually achieved through contrary approaches. This characteristic lends an element of economy to SSR: gains in several different objectives may be realized from a single investment of time.

Limitations and Strengths of SSR

No reading activity always works, and some problems have been reported with SSR programs. SSR may not always be workable on a school-wide basis (Blake, 1979; Minton, 1980). Problems can emerge when there is a lack of attractive reading material or poor role modeling by teachers (McCracken and McCracken, 1978). Wilmot (1975) suggests that there may be an optimum balance between reading instruction and SSR, beyond which more SSR becomes counterproductive. Blake (1979) and Gambrell (1978) have suggested ways to keep SSR going, and good judgement regarding when to use more or less SSR appears to be critical to the success of these programs.

SSR also exhibits distinct strengths. It has great intuitive appeal, and initial enthusiasm for these programs is usually very high. The reported engagement level during SSR for the great majority of students is uniformly high, suggesting a high number of academically engaged minutes and extensive opportunity to learn, apply strategies and skills, and develop taste and interests. Although definitive longitudinal research on SSR is yet to be done, the available research suggests its usefulness in achieving accountability for student reading growth in its broadest and most appropriate sense.

When its guidelines are met, SSR seems to unite selected positive aspects of both direct and open instruction models into one effective activity. SSR provides for the essential reality testing, practice, and application aspects of reading instruction in materials that are appropriate to individual interests and ability levels. SSR seems to unify much that is requisite for effective reading instruction into a single investment of time and is therefore deserving of prominent consideration from those reading specialists, classroom teachers, and administrators responsible for accountability and effective reading instruction.

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